

Is There a Basis for the Notion of Athletic Identity?

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Abstract

Just as identity is a complex multidimensional construct, so “athletic identity” is likely to consist of a constellation of attributes. The present study explored relations between athletic identity, as measured by the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS: Brewer, Raalte, & Linder, 1993) and aspects of self-concept, as measured by the Self-Description Questionnaire III (SDQ: Marsh, 1989). The participants in the study were 917 athletes (476 females) on sporting scholarships linked with the Australian Institute of Sport and were therefore a group for whom the term “athletic identity” has strong relevance. The SDQ requires respondents to rate the accuracy and importance of characteristics as self-descriptors. No relationships were found between AIMS athletic identity and accuracy scores on SDQ sporting self-concept but there were gender-linked relationships between athletic identity and different aspects of SDQ academic self-concept. For the SDQ importance ratings, significant relationships were observed between athletic identity and sporting self-concept for both genders and also between athletic identity and verbal self-concept for females. We discuss what the findings mean for the notion of athletic identity.

Introduction

People hold self-images which they believe to be an accurate description of their past, present, and future selves. These images form what is known as their self-identity; a multi-dimensional construct that develops as a result of a complex interaction between individuals' cognitions, emotions, and social experiences (Reicher, 2000). It is widely accepted that, as well as being multidimensional in nature, a person's sense of identity is hierarchically ordered and becomes more distinct with age (Marsh, Byrne, & Shavelson, 1988).

Identity refers to those “parts of a self composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play” (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 284). Individuals have been found to develop, and then cast off, many different identities throughout their lives

(Markus & Nurius, 1986). Such roles may include being a friend, a student, an artist, a parent, or an athlete, with situational influences making one role more salient than another (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). Identity can motivate and direct behaviour, provide a sense of meaning, and serve as a reference point for choices about future behaviour or life direction (Markus & Nurius). Notions of identity can be related to many psychological constructs, including that of self-concept.

A number of inventories have been developed to measure and distinguish between the specific self-concept domains. Validated multidimensional scales, such as the Self-Description Questionnaire (SDQ) and the Self-Description Questionnaire III (SDQ-III; Marsh, 1989), measure both academic and non-academic areas of self-concept for pre-adolescent (SDQ) and late adolescent/young adult (SDQ-III) populations, and have frequently been used in studies that have focused on the relationship between sport and self-concept.

Central to this research is the non-academic component of self-identity, which is divided into social, emotional and physical facets of self, including aspects of self-concept related to physical ability, physical appearance, and peer and parent relationships. Studies have found that different facets of individuals' physical self-concepts, such as their perception of their physical ability or appearance, can influence the frequency with which they participate in athletic activities (Marsh & Jackson, 1986), as well as their overall physical fitness levels (Marsh & Peart, 1988). When comparing the SDQ-III results of athletes and non-athletes, athletes have been found to exhibit significantly higher scores on physical ability self-concepts but to not differ on self-concepts related to physical appearance (Marsh & Jackson; Marsh, Perry, Horsely, & Roche, 1995). Within the athlete group itself, there have been mixed findings regarding the existence of gender differences in self-concept (Marsh, 1989; Marsh & Jackson; Marsh et al., 1995).

Athletic Identity

A dimension of identity that has received much attention in the psychological literature, and has been found to significantly impact upon an individual's personal and psychological development, is athletic identity, which is a measure of the "degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role" (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993, p. 237). The high interest in this concept is unsurprising due to the recent increase in professionalism in sport throughout the world, especially in Australia. Linked with these developments, many athletes continue to increase the physical and mental energy they devote to practice and competition in the hope that their athletic talents may lead to a full-time professional career. This commitment leaves many athletes little time to participate in, or to explore, other activities.

Brewer et al. (1993) suggested that athletic identity is stronger in males than females but other research has not demonstrated this same gender effect. Considering that the role of gender in our society is dynamic, especially in relation to sport involvement, this relationship is worthy of further investigation.

Many positive physiological and psychosocial outcomes have been linked to a strong, but not exclusive, athletic identity. These include higher sport and exercise participation rates (Brewer et al., 1993), good health and physical fitness (Marsh, 1993), and greater global self-esteem (Marsh et al., 1995). Further studies report that identification with the athletic role has positive consequences for the development of social skills and relationships, as well as confidence in other areas of life (Richards & Aries, 1999; Petitpas, 1978). However, research has also shown that if individuals develop a strong and exclusive athletic identity and fail to develop any alternate identity roles, there is an increased risk of experiencing psychosocial and career identity issues later in life (Brewer et al.). Wiechman and Williams (1997) found that this type of extreme identity may result in identity foreclosure. This is when the athletic aspect of self dominates all other aspects, thereby hindering the development of a multidimensional self-concept. Horton and Mack (2000) found no evidence of this, reporting that individuals with high levels of athletic identity ranked the athletic role no higher in their lives than those with lower levels of athletic identity, and therefore were not considered to be restricted from experiencing other life roles.

Despite a significant amount of research on the positive and negative impact that an exclusive athletic identity may have on self-identity, there is a limited amount of information on identity characteristics that are commonly possessed by individuals who have high levels of athletic identity. Previous studies have analysed the differences between elite athletes and non-

athletes on multiple dimensions of identity (Marsh & Jackson, 1986; Marsh et al., 1995). However, no connection has been made in terms of the relationship between levels of athletic identity and these constructs.

This project aims to investigate whether a distinctive athletic profile exists in relation to the dominant dimensions of identity characteristics possessed by elite athletes. This involves exploring the characteristics of self-identity that elite athletes report as accurate representations of themselves, and how important they rate specific dimensions of self to be. This project also aims to further explore gender differences in athletic identity and in relation to the dominant dimensions of self-identity endorsed by elite athletes.

Method

Participants

Survey forms were distributed to all athletes on scholarship ($n = 2915$) at Australia's State or Territory Academies or Institutes of Sport in 2003. Completed surveys were returned by 917 (476 females) athletes, giving a response rate of 31.5%. Participants ranged in age from 11-60 years ($M=19.3$, $SD=4.9$). They represented all states and territories and 48 different sports, with the largest numbers involved with basketball (100), soccer (83), swimming (81), hockey (73), cricket (61), rowing (60), water polo (57), netball (49), athletics (48), and baseball (44).

Assessment Tools

Self-Description Questionnaire III (SDQ-III Short version; Marsh, 1989). Identity was measured using the short version of the SDQ-III, a 13-item scale which measures 13 different facets of self. These facets are: Math, Physical Appearance, General, Esteem, Honesty/Trustworthiness, Physical Ability, Verbal, Emotional Stability, Parent Relationships, Academic (General), Same-Sex Relationships, Opposite-Sex Relationships, Spiritual Values/Religion, and Problem-Solving. For this study, respondents were presented with statements about 12 of the 13 facets of self (General Esteem item excluded) and asked to indicate the accuracy and importance of those characteristics for themselves. Items were rated on a 9-point scale, with 1 indicating *not accurate* or *not important*, and 9 indicating *very accurate* or *very important*. The full version of the SDQ-III is one of the strongest multi-dimensional instruments available to measure the self-concept of populations within the late adolescent to early adulthood age-group in terms of psychometric properties and construct validation (Byrne, 1996). The external validity of the scale, as well as the reliability of the subscales, which range from the .80s to the low-.90s, has been demonstrated. The short version of the

SDQ-III has been confirmed as being psychometrically suitable for research purposes (Marsh & Jackson, 1986).

Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer, Raalte, & Linder, 1993) The AIMS is a 10-item scale which provides a measure of the extent to which an individual identifies as an athlete. The reliability and construct validity properties of the AIMS were established by Brewer et al. (1993). Respondents indicate their level of agreement with 10 statements on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). The total score is used to provide an overall measure of athletic identity, with higher scores indicating stronger identification with the athletic role.

Procedure

Survey forms were distributed by the Athlete Career and Education (ACE) coordinators in each state. Confidentiality was assured by asking athletes to seal their completed forms in the envelopes provided and to return them to their ACE coordinator, or mail them (reply paid) to the researchers.

Results

Reliability analysis of the AIMS revealed satisfactory internal consistency for the scale, with a Cronbach's alpha of .78. Reliability analysis of the SDQ-III accuracy and importance scales also revealed satisfactory internal consistencies, with Cronbach's alphas of .82 and .83 respectively. AIMS mean scores and standard deviations are shown in Table 1. An independent samples t-test compared the AIMS scores for males and females. There were no significant differences ($p > .05$).

Table 1: AIMS Means and Standard Deviations

Participants	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Total Group	893	36.33	5.5
Males	430	36.62	5.8
Females	463	36.06	5.2

The means and standard deviations for each of the 12 subscales of the SDQ-III are shown in Table 2. Characteristics that were strongly endorsed as being accurate self-descriptions for this group were sporting ability, honesty/reliability/trustworthiness, and good interaction with parents. Indicators of interpersonal relationships were rated more highly ($p < .01$) than intellectual abilities (except for verbal skills). Characteristics that were least endorsed were physical appearance and spirituality/religiosity. The rank order of attributes changed slightly when athletes rated their

importance. The characteristics rated as most important were honesty/reliability/trustworthiness, good interactions with parents, and emotional stability. While physical ability had been ranked as the most accurate descriptor, it was seen as less important than many other attributes, ranking 5th behind verbal ability. With a rating of 7.53, verbal skills were seen to be more important ($p < .01$) than problem solving (6.87) and maths skills (6.67). General academic ability (7.18) was ranked 6th in the list, behind physical ability (7.37). Just as respondents had been least likely to describe themselves as physically attractive or spiritual, they also considered these to be their least important characteristics.

Table 2: SDQ-III Means and Standard Deviations

Item	Accuracy		Importance	
	M	SD	M	SD
Sports/physical ability	7.83	1.4	7.37	1.6
Physically attractive	5.87	1.7	5.56	2.1
Interactions opposite sex	7.00	1.6	6.90	1.7
Interaction same sex	7.31	1.5	7.14	1.7
Interactions with parents	7.57	1.7	8.05	1.5
Emotional stability	7.09	1.7	7.60	1.6
Spiritual/religious	4.02	2.5	4.06	2.6
Honest/reliable/trustworthy	7.72	1.4	8.19	1.4
Verbal skills	7.09	1.5	7.53	1.5
Mathematical ability	6.51	1.7	6.67	1.8
Academic	6.76	1.7	7.18	1.7
Problem solving	6.59	1.7	6.87	1.8

Analysis of Group Differences

A one-way between groups MANOVA was performed to investigate gender differences in relation to the mean scores of the SDQ-III accuracy and importance ratings of self-descriptors. A significant difference was found between males and females on both the accuracy and importance ratings of the SDQ-III with $F(12, 861) = 14.94$, $p = .00$ and $F(12, 853) = 4.97$, $p = .00$ respectively. When the SDQ-III accuracy items were considered separately, male athletes were found to rate physical attractiveness [$F(1, 872) = 52.76$, $p < .01$], interactions with the opposite sex [$F(1, 872) = 10.08$, $p < .01$], emotional stability [$F(1, 872) = 30.95$, $p < .01$], and problem-solving [$F(1, 872) = 17.42$, $p < .05$] significantly higher than female athletes. In relation to the SDQ-III importance items, male athletes were found to rank the importance of physical attractiveness [$F(1, 864) = 6.10$, $p < .05$] and interactions with the opposite sex [$F(1, 864) = 11.32$, $p < .05$] significantly higher than female athletes. Female athletes were found to

rank verbal skills [$F(1, 864) = 5.67, p < .05$] as being significantly more important than males athletes.

To complete these analyses of gender differences, the weighted accuracy x importance scores were subjected to a one-way between groups MANOVA. A statistically significant overall difference was found between males and females with $F(12, 851) = 12.84, p < .01$. Post-hoc univariate tests revealed that there were significant differences in the case of four of the product means, with male athletes found to rate physical attractiveness [$F(1, 862) = 33.50, p < .01$], interactions with the opposite sex [$F(1, 862) = 15.42, p < .05$], emotional stability [$F(1, 862) = 20.26, p < .01$], and problem-solving [$F(1, 862) = 9.17, p < .01$] significantly higher than female athletes.

Analysing Relationships

A second aim of this study was to explore relations between athletic identity, as measured by AIMS, and facets of self-concept, as measured by SDQ-III. These correlations are presented in Table 3. In terms of the accuracy component of the SDQ-III, athletic identity was negatively correlated with problem-solving, mathematical ability, and general academic ability. In terms of the importance component of the SDQ-III, athletic identity was significantly correlated with physical ability and verbal skills.

Table 3: Pearson Correlations between AIMS and SDQ

SDQ-III Items	Accuracy	Importance
Sports/physical ability	.037	.262**
Physically attractive	-.023	.058
Interactions opposite sex	-.014	-.011
Interactions same sex	.008	.048
Interactions with parents	-.017	.006
Emotional stability	-.024	-.023
Spiritual/religious	-.005	-.029
Honest/reliable/trustworthy	-.019	.014
Verbal skills	.065	.102**
Mathematical ability	-.120**	.001
Academic	-.114**	-.026
Problem solving	-.085*	-.030

Note: ** denotes $p < .01$; * denotes $p < .05$

Because of the already-noted gender differences in some facets of self-concept, we repeated these analyses of the relations between athletic identity and self-concept for each gender separately. In terms of the accuracy component of the SDQ-III, for females athletic identity was positively correlated with verbal skills ($r = .173, p < .01$). For males, athletic identity was negatively correlated with mathematical ability ($r = -.239, p < .01$), general academic skills ($r = -.210, p <$

$.01$), and problem-solving ($r = -.206, p < 0.05$). In relation to the importance component of the SDQ-III, female athletic identity was positively correlated with physical ability ($r = .286, p < 0.01$), verbal skills ($r = .164, p < 0.01$), and interactions with the same sex ($r = .101, p < 0.05$), and negatively correlated with spirituality/religiosity ($r = -.108, p < 0.05$). For males, athletic identity was positively correlated with physical ability self-concept ($r = .239, p < 0.01$).

Discussion

As a group, the athletes identified themselves as possessing a high level of physical ability, as being honest and reliable individuals, and as having good interactions with their parents. They were also found to value honesty, emotional stability, and sharing positive interactions with their parents. Physical appearance and spirituality/religiosity were the dimensions of self-identity rated by the group as being both the least accurate and the least important to them.

There were no differences in the athletic identity levels of male and female athletes in this study. However, there were gender differences in relation to self-description. Male athletes felt that they were more attractive, had better interactions with the opposite sex, were more emotionally stable, and better at problem-solving than their female counterparts. Male athletes were also found to give higher ratings to physical attractiveness and interactions with the opposite sex.

When looking at the relationship between the AIMS and the SDQ-III, results showed that knowing an individual's level of athletic identity tells us something about how that individual is likely to rate himself or herself on a number of other aspects of identity. Athletes with higher levels of athletic identity usually rate themselves as having lower levels of academic, maths, and problem-solving abilities. This tendency is stronger in male than female athletes. Females with higher levels of athletic identity, on the other hand, are more likely to rate themselves as having stronger verbal skills and better interactions with the same sex. As expected, both male and female elite athletes were more likely to rate physical ability as being an important aspect of their self-identity.

These empirical outcomes are significant from a counselling point of view. Albion and Fogarty (2002; 2005) argued that, except for a small group of athletes preparing for careers in highly paid sports, there is no evidence that elite athletes in Australia show evidence of identity foreclosure. Nor is there evidence of gender differences. Murphy, Petitpas, and Brewer (1996) reached the same conclusion about US student athletes. Our results in this study suggest that one should not be too hasty drawing conclusions about equivalence across populations. There may not be gender differences on

athletic identity as measured by AIMS, but males and females do differ in relation to the types of self-descriptors they favour. There may well be differences between athletes and non-athletes too. We have not made that comparison. These self-descriptors represent important aspects of identity that need to be given consideration in career counselling. They are likely to influence career decision making, achievement, and feelings of self-worth.

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